Partnering with Business Coalitions

By Brett Pawlowski

COMMON INTERESTS AND A COLLABORATIVE MINDSET MAKE COALITIONS PARTNERS IN EDUCATION

Brett Pawlowski

is president of DeHavilland Associates, a consulting and communications firm specializing in business-education partnerships. He is the creator of the Effective Education Partnership Conference, which will be held July 2008 in Washington, D.C. For more information, contact him at brett@dehavillandassociates.com.

Many career and technical education (CTE) programs rely heavily on support from the business community to serve their students; however, there's very little information available on building solid business-education partnerships. Most people in the business world will say that they care about education. But how can educators find the people willing to pay

education more than lip service by committing their time and resources to support schools? What do those people want to accomplish? What can they bring to the table? And how can you build sustainable partnerships that meet the needs of all parties over time—those of educators, businesspeople and, most importantly, students? To answer these questions and others, DeHavilland Associates has been conducting surveys of educators and external stakeholders alike on their experiences with community-school partnerships. Its most recent survey, conducted in June 2007, polled leaders of business coalitions across the country on their thoughts and activities in K-12 education. The results will be of interest to anyone interested in building effective workforce development initiatives.

Business Coalitions

A business coalition refers to any organized group of businesspeople focusing on issues that affect their businesses. These can include groups with several areas of interest, such as chambers of commerce or business roundtables, or groups dedicated exclusively to education, such as National Alliance of State Science and Mathematics Coalitions (NASSMC) affiliates or Jump$tart coalitions. The sidebar titled "Types of Coalitions" offers more information on various types of business coalitions.

Business coalitions often operate differently than do individual businesses when partnering with schools; their business participation can vary widely. Depending on their market and the interests of their staff or leadership, they could be involved in almost any grade level, subject area or extracurricular focus. Business coalitions, in contrast, hold a strong and almost exclusive focus on workforce development. Their interests directly coincide with those of CTE program leaders, and as such make excellent prospective partners for programs that prepare students for the world of work.

Coalition Priorities and Interests

Coalitions' project priorities, the types of partners they solicit, and the outcomes they work toward are all built around their focus on creating a capable workforce. However, because there are different types of coalitions interested in education, it's worth considering how their particular interests and objectives can affect their approach.

Desired Outcomes. As can be seen in Chart 1, coalitions are unified in their interest in workforce preparedness, and most are also interested in outcomes that contribute to, or relate to, this core interest such as graduation rates, mastery of basic skills and college attendance rates. However, while every type of coalition ranks workforce preparedness as their most desired outcome, they differ on other priorities.

Chart 1: Desired Outcomes
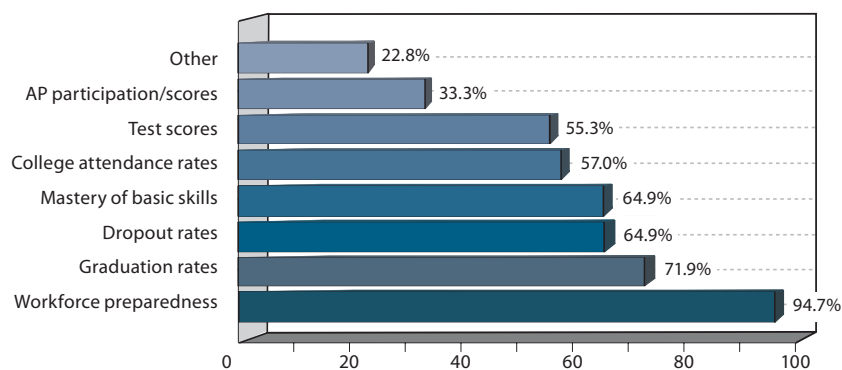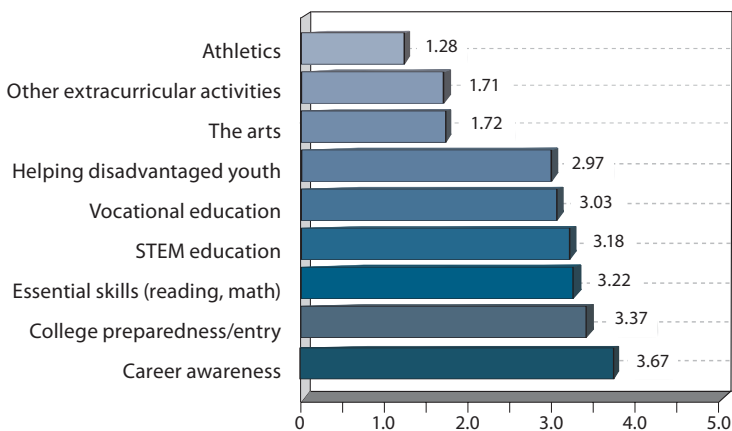*Survey item: What types of partnership outcomes are of particular interest?*

Other	22.8%
AP participation/scores	33.3%
Test scores	55.3%
College attendance rates	57.0%
Mastery of basic skills	64.9%
Dropout rates	64.9%
Graduation rates	71.9%
Workforce preparedness	94.7%

Chart 2: Project Priorities
Survey item: On a scale of 1–5, with 1 being "no activity" and 5 being "a major level of activity," rank the following by how actively you work in these areas:

Athletics	1.28
Other extracurricular activities	1.71
The arts	1.72
Helping disadvantaged youth	2.97
Vocational education	3.03
STEM education	3.18
Essential skills (reading, math)	3.22
College preparedness/entry	3.37
Career awareness	3.67

Local education foundations (supported primarily by businesses in the community) and business roundtables, for example, identified test scores as one of their most desired outcomes much more frequently than did other coalitions. Local education foundations also placed dropout rates higher on their list of outcomes than did others.

Partnership Selection Criteria. According to the survey results, coalitions are open to working with partners across the spectrum of grade levels, locations and types of organizations (as seen in "Coalition Experiences," below), and they've made it clear that partnership selection is based primarily on the potential for a collaborative focus on results. When asked about their selection criteria, respondents were more interested in the attitudes and approach of their education partners than in external factors such as location. Specifically, respondents most often evaluate prospective partners based on their willingness to collaborate (84.7 percent), interest in measurable outcomes (67.6 percent), and commitment to the project (64 percent), while factors such as an existing relationship with the coalition and accessibility to location were ranked much lower (33.3 percent and 21.6 percent, respectively).

Project Focus. Consistent with their interest in outcomes related to career preparedness, coalitions report that they focus on projects involving career awareness, college preparedness, mastery of essential skills and STEM education (see Chart 2). As

might be expected, the priorities of some types of coalitions differed. NASSMC coalitions, for example, listed STEM education as their top focus (4.87 out of 5), which is understandable given their focus; however, business roundtables also listed STEM education as their top priority, although not nearly as emphatically (3.67 out of 5). Breaking with other types of organizations, local education foundations focused more on issues of equity, listing essential skills and helping disadvantaged youth as their top areas of activity (3.78 and 3.75 respectively).

Coalition Experiences

The vast majority of coalition leaders responding to this survey state that they work directly with schools, districts and postsecondary institutions. Half (49.6 percent) indicate that direct-to-school outreach is just one of a number of things they do to support education, while 40.4 percent state that it is their primary method of education outreach. The good news for prospective partners is that coalition leaders have generally been very happy with their past experiences working with schools; are open to partnerships in a variety of areas, so long as they align with their interests in workforce development; and bring a great deal of value to the partnerships in which they participate.

Where Coalitions Work. Business coalitions have historically worked primarily with formal learning institutions: the majority report having partnerships with postsecondary institutions (85.6 percent), districts (78.4 percent), and schools (73 percent). Their involvement in informal programs is less pronounced, with 41.4 percent reporting some partnership activities with informal learning organizations such as museums, and only 26.1 percent indicating partnerships with after-school programs. In terms of grade level, coalitions work more at the high school level than at other levels: they report spending 42.4 percent of their time on high school-level programs, and the rest of their time evenly divided among elementary, middle and postsecondary programs. This makes sense, given that high school students are on the cusp of either college or full-time employment.

However, the fact that 57.6 percent of their time is spent in other areas shows that coalitions understand the need for reaching students prior to high school, and for helping guide college students to areas of high need. Interestingly, NASSMC coalitions, which focus primarily on science and math issues, were more likely to work at the middle school level (38.8 percent) than were others, highlighting the importance of building a solid foundation in STEM subjects at an earlier age. Because many coalitions (particularly chambers and education foundations) are located in larger cities, it should come as no surprise that they report spending more time in urban areas (44.2 percent) than in suburban and rural areas (29.4 percent and 26.4 percent, respectively). But again, the results make it clear that coalitions are engaged in all areas, not just urban centers.

Chart 3: Partnership Planning
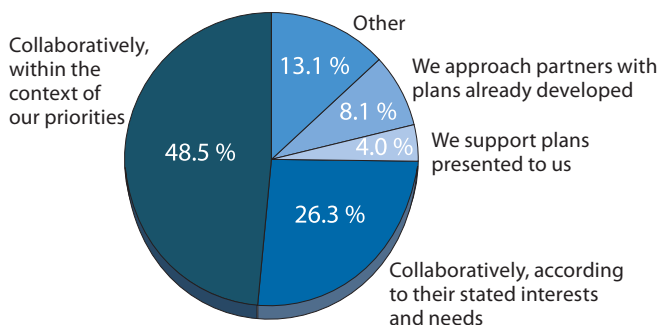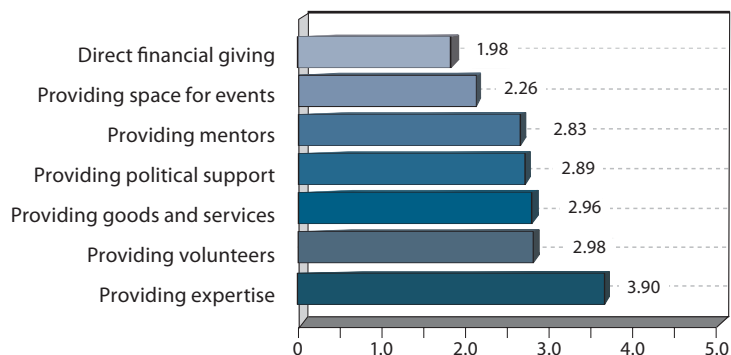*Survey item: How are you typically involved in the planning process?*

- Other: 13.1 %
- We approach partners with plans already developed: 8.1 %
- We support plans presented to us: 4.0 %
- Collaboratively, according to their stated interests and needs: 26.3 %
- Collaboratively, within the context of our priorities: 48.5 %

Chart 4: Types of Support
Survey item: On a scale of 1–5, with 1 being "no support" and 5 being "a major category of support," rank the following by the level of support you provide directly to your school/district partners:

- Direct financial giving: 1.98
- Providing space for events: 2.26
- Providing mentors: 2.83
- Providing political support: 2.89
- Providing goods and services: 2.96
- Providing volunteers: 2.98
- Providing expertise: 3.90

Partnership Practices: Partnership Design, Tracking, Measurement. The most successful partnerships are designed and managed according to a set of commonly accepted principles (see the sidebar "Principles of Effective Business-Education Partnerships"). Responses from coalition leaders indicate that they're aware of, and follow, these established practices. In developing new partnerships, for example, coalition leaders strongly prefer taking a collaborative approach to partnership development—one of the core principles of effective program design.

In fact, as seen in Chart 3, 74.8 percent of respondents indicate an interest in sharing the opportunities and responsibilities involved in partnership design, compared with 8.1 percent who approach partners with plans in hand, and only 4 percent who are willing to support pre-planned projects presented to them. Coalition leaders also demonstrate an interest in tracking activity and outcomes: 82.6 percent state that either they or their partners always or sometimes track partnership activity (such as volunteer hours logged or the value of donated goods and services), while 87.6 percent note that they or their partner make tracking partnership outcomes a priority.

Types of Resources Provided by Coalitions. Business coali-

tions are typically comprised of business owners and top corporate managers, a group which holds a deep understanding of business principles and knowledge of various markets. While coalitions offer many types of support to their education partners, it is this expertise, first and foremost, that they wish to contribute to their partnership efforts. As can be seen in Chart 4, coalitions consider the expertise they provide as their most significant contribution. This is followed by resources such as volunteers, goods and services, political support and mentors—all of which can be of great value depending on the goals and structure of a given partnership. Interestingly, direct financial giving is a last consideration.

Satisfaction with the Partnership Process. Partnerships require a great deal of effort, and partners may not always be happy with the results of these collaborations. However, coalition leaders clearly indicate their satisfaction with both the partnership process and with the outcomes they generated, with 81.9 percent stating that they are either extremely or somewhat satisfied with the process, and 90.2 percent being extremely or somewhat satisfied with the outcomes generated.

Non-partnership Involvement in Education. In addition to their work with education partners, coalitions are actively engaged in increasing awareness and knowledge among their members and other stakeholders. The vast majority (87.2 percent) hold educational events for their members and other interested parties; 59.6 percent are involved in lobbying efforts to state and local politicians; and 42.2 percent seek to increase public understanding of education issues by conducting original research and/or publishing position papers on various issues. While these initiatives may not directly benefit their education partners, there are clear indirect benefits for education, and prospective partners should consider how they can provide support to coalitions in their efforts.

Lessons Learned. Coalition leaders were asked to offer thoughts on the lessons they had learned through past partnership initiatives. The vast majority of responses to this open-ended question focused on classic and critical elements of partnership design and development, including:

- Ensure balance. As one respondent noted, "Equality of partners is essential to avoid business-dominated or education-dominated practices and processes."
- Make responsibilities explicit and have them endorsed by top officials. "Design a contract that spells out each party's responsibilities and have it approved by the local school board and CEO. Then have the parties sign it."
- Clearly identify outcomes for each partner. "Have agreement on outcomes, process, and be clear who your customer is, *e.g.* department of education, superintendent, principal, sponsors, and what their various, and sometimes differing, expectations are."
- Communication is key. "Constant communication with all stakeholders is key to success. Relationships make or break a change effort."
- Plan for sustainability. "The partnership cannot be connected to a district employee who may be 'here today and gone

tomorrow'. The tide of education change, and flexibility must be built in to accommodate changes in policies and mandates."

Obstacles to Strong Partnerships. While the vast majority of coalition leaders are satisfied with the partnerships they have built, there is always room for improvement, and survey respondents identified some of the key areas in which they've faced challenges in past partnerships. The issue faced by the greatest number of coalition leaders (59.1 percent) lies in getting partners to commit the resources and time required of a successful partnership, followed by 41.9 percent identifying the failure to ensure that coalitions and their members receive the visibility they expect for their work in education. (The awareness and public goodwill generated by education partnerships can be a key factor in securing partnerships with coalitions and with individual businesses). Other obstacles include difficulty in finding the right key contact (39.8 percent), having different priorities from partners (36.6 percent), ensuring accountability (28 percent), and facing problems maintaining a focus on outcomes (25.8 percent).

Identifying Partnership Opportunities with Coalitions

CTE professionals who wish to partner with business coalitions should know that it is their collaborative mindset and interest in measurable outcomes, not their location or previous relationships, that will help them to engage coalition leaders. For those school leaders who are prepared to approach a prospective coalition partner, one question remains: How? Coalition leaders were asked about the channels they use to communicate with prospective education partners and identified several ways in which schools and districts could stay informed of their coalition's activities, including opportunities for developing partnerships.

The majority of coalitions (70.6 percent) offer current information via their Web sites, and they encourage direct contact through meeting attendance (65.7 percent) and personal outreach (64.7 percent). Several also noted that they publish e-mail (40.2 percent) or print (24.5 percent) newsletters to keep prospective partners informed of coalition news and information. Based on responses to this question and others, prospective partners should learn what they can from the online and print materials provided by coalitions, then initiate direct contact with an open mind and an eye for results.

Looking Ahead

Coalition leaders represent the interests and efforts of businesses across the country, and these stakeholders are keenly interested in working with educators to prepare young people for success in life. These coalitions are collaborative, focused on results, and able to bring the time and talents of accomplished people to bear. They are also satisfied with the results of their previous partnerships and looking for new opportunities to make an impact. CTE professionals can benefit greatly by taking the initiative to develop relationships with these supporters of education. ◰